

Big blue whales and puppy dogs' tails, that's what good kiddy mags are made of

By Mordecai Richler

The Blue Whale has a heart as big as a Volkswagen.

There are more stars in the sky than there are grains of sand on all the beaches in the world.

The white pelican is probably the largest bird in Canada, its wing span so impressive that if you stacked dimes in a row it would take almost \$300 worth to cover its width.

Millions of tons of space dust fall to earth every year. If you were to drag a magnet across the ground, 20 per cent of the particles that would cling to it would be from outer space.

For these amazing facts, so appealingly rendered, I am indebted to *Owl*, a Canadian magazine for children.

It has long been a cherished belief of mine that when something culturally different surfaces here, say the paintings of Alex Colville, Alice Munro's short stories or the House of Commons' debates on cable TV (usually a case of form without content), there will be no need to thump the nationalist drum, for it will make its own way on merit. Such, happily, would now seem to be the case with *Owl*, a delightful monthly magazine for children, sprung out of Toronto.

Owl is directed at kids between the ages of eight and 12, as well as Joe Clark, who is reliably reported to read it by flashlight under his blankets after Ms. McTeer has tucked him in for the night, free at last to soar over Ottawa on her broomstick. The magazine is not only gaining increasing acceptance here, but recently sold translation rights for an Italian edition, *L'Orsa*, to be published in Milan, which may soon be followed by other European editions. Meanwhile, such has been the success of *Owl* at home that its present circulation is more than 85,000. The publishers now

issue charming books based on regular features in the magazine and next January they will launch a companion magazine, *Chickadee*, for younger children between the ages of four and eight. *Chickadee* will be crammed with puzzles, games, things to make and stories. Each issue will also include a surprise, possibly a puppet, maybe a jigsaw puzzle or a record.

All this, mind you, is not the shrewd

ural gift to amuse even as they educate.

Owl is the inspiration of Mary Anne Brinckman, a mother of three, married to an antiquarian bookdealer, and Anabel Slaight, a former primary-school teacher from Vancouver who has also taught in England. They launched the magazine in 1976, having acquired 7,000 subscribers of *The Young Naturalist* when it went out of business; and now, such is the immediate response of their readers, they answer some 10,000 letters a year, among them an anniversary note that ran, "I'm sorry I couldn't get you a birthday present but I have enclosed a fake \$10 for you to buy whatever you want in an imaginary store." As one of my own children subscribes to *Owl*, I can also testify that each letter to the magazine is not only promptly answered but the answer is handwritten and personal.

Owl is published by a nonprofit group, The Young Naturalist Foundation, and the money it earns is plowed right back into improving the 32-page monthly. It's a lively magazine, fetchingly put together. Regular features include a two-page newspaper, *HOOT*; a handsomely produced nature feature on the Atlantic salmon or wild horses or polar bears; games, puzzle and informative pieces on how to build birdfeeders or grow bulbs in winter. My favorite feature, however, is the absolutely loopy Dr. Zed, written by Gordon Penrose and designed and illustrated by Linda Bucholtz Ross. Whether they are offering instruction on how to make Groovy Sounds, construct Vibrating Whirly-Birds or Magic Illusion Wheels, they are consistently appealing.

Put plainly, *Owl*'s awfully good stuff. I recommend it not only for your own children, but as a gift for kids abroad. And it costs only 95 cents a copy.



labor of some publishing monolith, contrived only after unspeakable market research gurus had been consulted in their cork-lined offices, sending out their minions with 38-page questionnaires to test responses. On the contrary. It is largely the work of two determined, engaging ladies, and a tribute to their good taste: a refusal to exploit or condescend to young readers and a nat-